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School uniform

Summary

Research shows that many parents in Northern Ireland struggle to meet back to school costs each year. This briefing paper considers school uniform policies and financial assistance available for uniforms in Northern Ireland, England, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Policy and guidance

In each of the jurisdictions school uniform is a matter for schools or education authorities. In Northern Ireland, England and Wales guidance emphasises the importance of prioritising value for money. It states that schools should avoid agreements with a single retailer; that uniforms should include items readily available from a range of suppliers; and that they should limit branded items.

However, at a quarter of schools in Northern Ireland responding to a survey, the uniform was available from only one or two retailers, while many parents have said that they feel under pressure to buy branded clothing. In addition, 39% of school survey respondents stated that they had not taken any action to reduce school uniform costs in the past 12 months.

Financial assistance

School uniform grants are available in each of the jurisdictions, although the value, frequency and eligibility criteria of schemes vary, as outlined in the following table.

Table 1: Financial assistance for school uniform costs

	Amount	Frequency	Eligibility criteria
Northern Ireland	£35.75 - £56 (depending on age)	Annually	Similar eligibility criteria used for free school meals
England	Wide variations by local authority	Varies from annually to once in a school career	Wide variations
Republic of Ireland	€100	Annually	Include families in receipt of social welfare or in certain training schemes - means tested
Scotland	£20 - £110 depending on local authority	Usually annually	Wide variations
Wales	£105	One-off basis – post-primary pupils only	Eligibility for free school meals

1 Introduction

Research suggests that back to school costs, including school uniform, can be a significant financial burden for many families in Northern Ireland.¹ This briefing paper considers school uniform policies in Northern Ireland as well as England, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

2 Northern Ireland

School uniform is a matter for principals and Boards of Governors of individual schools to determine, and there is no legislation governing it. A Circular from the Department of Education (the Department) provides advice on the matter, stating that it expects Boards of Governors to give high priority to cost considerations when considering school uniform policy.²

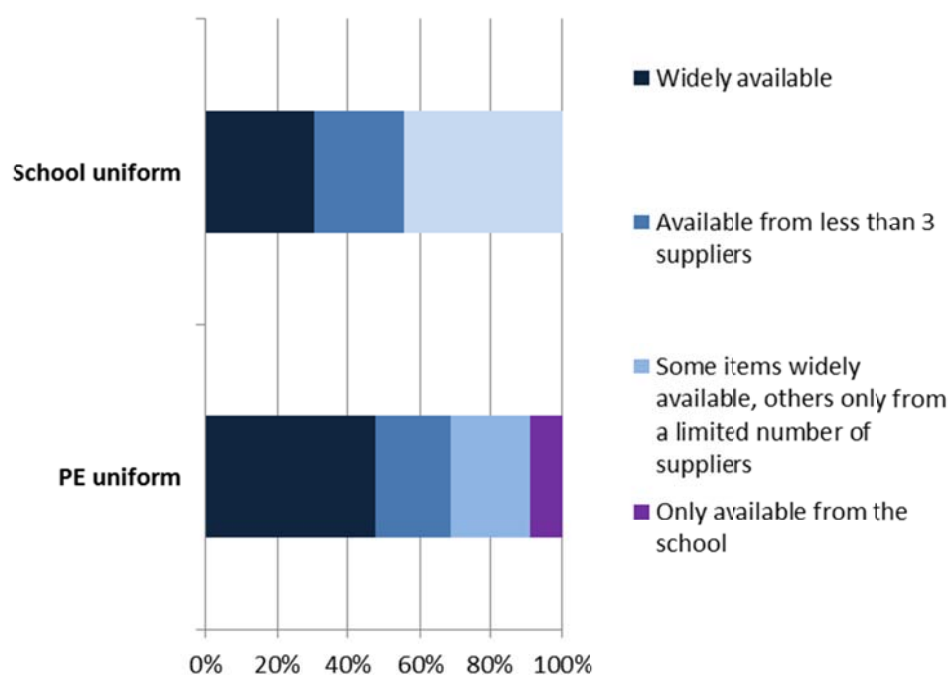
¹ Irish League of Credit Unions (2015) *Back to school costs for Northern Ireland families 2015* [online] Available at: <http://www.creditunion.ie/communications/news/2015/title.9332.en.php>

² Department of Education (2011) *Circular Number: 2011/04 Guidance to schools on school uniform policy* Bangor: DE

The Circular highlights findings from the Office of Fair Trading that costs increased where a school had an exclusive agreement with a retailer. It also notes the report's recommendation that uniforms should incorporate items readily available from a number of outlets.

However, findings from the School Omnibus Survey 2014 show that school uniforms at a quarter (25%) of schools responding were only available from one or two retailers, while a further 45% of schools noted that some items of their uniform were widely available while others were not. These findings are illustrated in Figure 1.³

Figure 1: Availability of uniforms across school survey respondents⁴



Of the schools responding to the Omnibus survey, 39% stated that they had not taken any action to reduce school uniform costs in the past 12 months. A further 34% noted that they had incorporated items that are readily available “off the peg” from a number of outlets to reduce the cost of their school uniform, and 19% had made the uniform available in a wider range of shops.⁵

Research by the Irish League of Credit Unions found that 58% of parents surveyed felt under pressure to buy branded school uniform items rather than generic ones for their children. Almost three-quarters (74%) thought that schools do not do enough to keep school uniform costs down.⁶

³ Department of Education Statistics and Research Team (2014) *School Omnibus Survey 2014* Bangor: DE

⁴ Data from: Department of Education Statistics and Research Team (2014) *School Omnibus Survey 2014* Bangor: DE

⁵ Data from: Department of Education Statistics and Research Team (2014) *School Omnibus Survey 2014* Bangor: DE

⁶ Irish League of Credit Unions (2015) *Back to school costs for Northern Ireland families 2015* [online] Available at: <http://www.creditunion.ie/communications/news/2015/title.9332.en.php>

Financial assistance

The Clothing Allowances Scheme, administered by the Education Authority (EA), provides some assistance for parents of pupils in primary, post-primary and specials schools in relation to school uniform costs each year. The scheme does not intend to cover the full costs of a school uniform.⁷ Indeed, the amounts the scheme provides fall short of the average spend on uniform⁸, according to a survey of 1,000 adults in 2015.⁹

Table 2: Level of assistance from the Clothing Allowance Scheme¹⁰

Pupil	Assistance	Average spend ¹¹
Primary	£35.75	£96
Post-primary/ special under 15	£51	£180
Post-primary/ special over 15	£56	
Post-primary/ special PE	£22	£144

The criteria used are in line with those used to determine eligibility for free school meals. As such, children are eligible for the clothing allowance where:¹²

- The pupil or parent is in receipt of Income Support, Income based Jobseeker's Allowance or Income related Employment and Support Allowance;
- The parent receives Child Tax Credit or Working Tax Credit and has an annual taxable income not exceeding an amount determined by the Department;
- The parent receives Working Tax Credit "run-on"- the payment someone may receive for a further four weeks after they stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit;
- The parent receives the Guarantee element of State Pension Credit;
- The pupil has a statement of special educational needs and is designated to require a special diet;
- The pupil is a boarder at a special school;

⁷ Department of Education *Every School a Good School - The Governors' Role* [online] Available at: http://www.deni.gov.uk/schools_79_governor-roles-and-responsibilities_pg.htm

⁸ Irish League of Credit Unions (2015) *Back to school costs for Northern Ireland families 2015* [online] Available at: <http://www.creditunion.ie/communications/news/2015/title.9332.en.php>

⁹ Information provided by the Irish League of Credit Unions, August 2015

¹⁰ NIdirect (2014) *School uniform grant* [online] Available at: <http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/school-uniform-grant>

¹¹ Irish League of Credit Unions (2015) *Back to school costs for Northern Ireland families 2015* [online] Available at: <http://www.creditunion.ie/communications/news/2015/title.9332.en.php>

¹² Department of Education *Every School a Good School - The Governors' Role* [online] Available at: http://www.deni.gov.uk/schools_79_governor-roles-and-responsibilities_pg.htm

- The pupil is the child of an asylum seeker supported by the Home Office National Asylum Support Service (NASS); or
- None of the above applies and a child presents at school hungry. The school should provide free school meals and immediately make a referral to the EA.

The Department extended the working tax credit criterion to post-primary students in 2014.¹³

Non-compliance

Departmental guidance states that if a pupil is not complying with the school's policy on uniform, the school should make "*discreet enquiries*" to find out if there are valid reasons, such as if the uniform has been lost, stolen or damaged. In such cases the guidance states that it would not be appropriate to send the child home.¹⁴

In cases where pupils are not wearing the correct uniform due to financial circumstances, the guidance states that schools should be "*sensitive to the situation*" and allow parents time to buy the required items. It notes that schools could help parents to apply for the Clothing Allowance Scheme.¹⁵

3 England

There is no legislation governing school uniform and it is up to each school to determine its own policy. Guidance from the Department for Education asserts that governing bodies must prioritise value for money in determining their policy. In this regard the guidance is similar to that in Northern Ireland, noting that uniforms should:¹⁶

- Be readily available;
- Be available cheaply in a supermarket or other good value retailer; and
- Have few compulsory branded items and avoid including expensive items.

The guidance also notes that schools should pass on any savings negotiated with retailers to parents; that they should not enter into any cash back arrangements and that they should generally avoid single supplier contracts.¹⁷ However, research suggests that many schools do not follow the guidance, with a large number continuing to use single suppliers and an increasing number requiring parents to purchase items of uniform with embroidered logos or branded sportswear.¹⁸

¹³ Department of Education *Every School a Good School - The Governors' Role* [online] Available at: http://www.deni.gov.uk/schools_79_governor-roles-and-responsibilities_pg.htm

¹⁴ Department of Education (2011) *Circular Number: 2011/04 Guidance to schools on school uniform policy* Bangor: DE

¹⁵ As above

¹⁶ Department for Education (2013) *School uniform: Guidance for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities* DfE

¹⁷ As above

¹⁸ Holloway, E., Mahony, S., Royston, S., Mueller, D. (2014) *At What Cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life* The Children's Society

Financial assistance

Some local authorities and academy schools offer school clothing grants. The departmental guidance suggests that individual schools may consider providing assistance through their own schemes, particularly to support new pupil intakes or where a school makes substantial changes to its uniform.¹⁹

Research indicates that there are wide variations in the availability and level of assistance for school uniforms, and in regard to the eligibility criteria for grants. Where help is available, it typically falls well below the cost of a complete school uniform, and is often available only once, for example at the beginning of post-primary school.²⁰

Non-compliance

Guidance notes that schools may discipline students in relation to uniform in line with the school's behaviour policy. A principal may ask a pupil to return home to remedy a breach of the policy; this is an authorised absence rather than exclusion; although if the breaches continue the absence may be counted as unauthorised.²¹

4 Republic of Ireland

School governing bodies determine their policy on school uniform and there is no legislation governing it.²² Departmental guidance on the issue is not prescriptive, although it emphasises consulting parents when planning any change of uniform.²³

In many schools students must change their uniform between the Junior Cycle and the Senior Cycle. The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection has stated that including branded and crested uniforms and requiring parents to purchase uniforms in designated shops places an unnecessary burden on parents.²⁴

Research has found that many parents consider meeting back to school costs including school uniform to be a burden, with an average spend on a primary school uniform of €166 and €258 at post-primary.²⁵

¹⁹ Department for Education (2013) *School uniform: Guidance for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities* DfE

²⁰ Holloway, E., Mahony, S., Royston, S., Mueller, D. (2014) *At What Cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life* The Children's Society

²¹ Department for Education (2013) *School uniform: Guidance for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities* DfE

²² Houses of the Oireachtas (2015) *Back to School Costs (Continued) Wednesday 8th July* [online] Available at: <http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/takes/dail2015070800028?opendocument>

²³ Department of Education and Skills (2013) *Reducing Costs to Parents – School Uniforms: Circular 0063/2013* [online] Available at: http://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0063_2013.pdf

²⁴ Houses of the Oireachtas: Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection (2013) *Report on Tackling Back to School Costs* Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas

²⁵ Irish League of Credit Unions (2015) *Back to school costs for Irish families 2015* [online] Available at: <http://www.creditunion.ie/communications/news/2015/title.9240.en.php>

Financial assistance

The Department of Social Protection provides support through the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance for children aged between four and 17 and those aged between 18 and 22 in full-time second-level education. It is available to families.²⁶

- In receipt of a social welfare payment (including Family Income Supplement and Back to Work Family Dividend) or a Health Service Executive payment;
- Taking part in an approved employment scheme (back to work scheme);
- Taking part in a recognised education or training course;
- Involved in an Area Partnership Scheme.

However, household income limits apply, incorporating income, savings and investments (excluding the family home). For example, a couple with two children must have a total weekly income of less than €593.40. The allowance is €100 for each eligible child aged four to 11 and €200 for each eligible child aged 18 to 22 annually.²⁷

5 Scotland

Scottish law does not require pupils to wear a uniform; it is up to education authorities and schools to decide on policy. Where students do not comply with the policy schools may implement proportionate disciplinary measures.²⁸

Financial assistance

Article 54 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 requires local authorities to provide school clothing grants to parents of pupils whose clothing may be inadequate for school education. Local authorities are responsible for setting the eligibility criteria and determining the amount.²⁹

The evidence indicates that there is significant variation in clothing grant schemes across Scotland. The average grant in 2009 was £50; in comparison to the typical spend on a school uniform of between £150 and £200. A working group in 2009 recommended a minimum grant of £70,³⁰ although recent evidence suggests that a majority of councils are not meeting this, with amounts ranging from £20 to £110.³¹

²⁶ Department of Social Protection (2015) *Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance* [online] Available at: <http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Back-to-School-Clothing-and-Footwear-Allowance.aspx>

²⁷ As above

²⁸ McGuire, S., Nisbet, I. (2008) *A-Z of Scots Education Law: a Guide for Parents* Norwich: The Stationery Office

²⁹ Short Life Working Group (2011) *Review of identification and registration of those eligible for free school meals, and school clothing grant provision across Scotland*

³⁰ Short Life Working Group (2011) *Review of identification and registration of those eligible for free school meals, and school clothing grant provision across Scotland*

³¹ BBC (2015) *Councils fail to meet clothing grant recommendation of £70 per child* [online] Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-33803651>

6 Wales

As in the other jurisdictions, there is no legislation governing school uniform and it is up to governing bodies to decide on policy. The Welsh Government's guidance highlights the importance of prioritising value for money when determining a school uniform policy, making a number of suggestions including:³²

- Stipulating only basic items and colours but not styles;
- Avoiding high cost items such as blazers and caps; and
- Where changes are made to the school uniform there should be a transitional period of a year during which the previous uniform may be worn.

Financial assistance

The Welsh Government provides a grant of £105 per eligible child towards the cost of school uniform. It is available on a one-off basis and it is not available for primary school pupils. The eligibility criteria are as follows:³³

- Pupils who are eligible for free school meals entering Year 7 of post-primary school; and
- Pupils in special schools, special needs resource bases and pupil referral units who are aged 11 and eligible for free school meals.

Non-compliance

The guidance notes that it is up to the principal to enforce school uniform policy, suggesting that they should at first try to establish why a pupil is not complying. Where this is due to financial considerations, schools should allow parents time to purchase the required items, and provide information on school uniform grants.³⁴

Where a uniform has been lost, stolen or damaged, the guidance notes that principals should not send pupils home. Principals can ask pupils to go home to change clothes without a formal exclusion.³⁵

³² Welsh Government (2011) *Guidance for governing bodies on school uniform and appearance policies* Cardiff: Welsh Government

³³ Welsh Government (2015) *School uniform grant* [online] Available at: <http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/parents/uniform/?lang=en>

³⁴ Welsh Government (2011) *Guidance for governing bodies on school uniform and appearance policies* Cardiff: Welsh Government

³⁵ Welsh Government (2011) *Guidance for governing bodies on school uniform and appearance policies* Cardiff: Welsh Government